

Insight and Outlook . . . By Joseph Kraft

Bundy and After

CPYRGHT

GOSSIP becomes king whenever the issue of the White House staff is up for discussion. And so it has been, unfortunately, in the case of McGeorge Bundy, the President's special assistant for national security affairs, who has been offered the post of president of the Ford Foundation.



Kraft

For the interesting question is not the question that is being asked. It is not: Who will replace Mr. Bundy? The interesting question is whether the President will want to continue the Bundy staff system as it now exists.

UNDER PRESENT conditions, Mr. Bundy, along with the Secretaries of State and Defense, is one of the President's principal advisers in foreign policy. While both Secretaries have direct access to the President, they and their deputies have enough confidence in Mr. Bundy to channel much of their business through him.

Serving under Mr. Bundy is a lustrous staff of regional specialists and economic and defense experts. Staff members work directly with Assistant Secretaries in the various departments and sometimes higher up. Occasionally, too, they have direct access to the President. Thus the Bundy staff system is a formidable power node at the very center of the national security community.

Special conditions fostered the development of this potent staff under President Kennedy. He wanted to consider himself sharp alternatives before they had passed through the fudge factory of

interagency compromise. He was deeply — and rightly — skeptical of the regular bureaucracies in the Departments of State and Defense, and in the Central Intelligence Agency. But as a President sustained by a narrow majority and subject to political charges of being immature and soft, he lacked the personal authority to challenge the top brass except on truly major issues.

The Bundy staff, in these circumstances, was an absolute necessity. It reached down and brought alternatives to the President's attention before they had been erased in the fudge factory. It provided an analytic tool for questioning widely held myths, and for generating new departures. It is typical that the low point of Mr. Bundy and his staff came with their failure to challenge the Bay of Pigs invasion plan, while their crowning achievement was the test ban, initiated and negotiated despite the skepticism of the regular bureaucracies.

PRESIDENT JOHNSON'S needs are very different. For one thing, by the time he came to office, the bureaucracies, particularly in the Defense Department, had already been brought under presidential control. Mr. Johnson, moreover, started with enough personal authority and enough of a reputation as a hard-liner to forestall the generation of new bureaucratic efforts to force his hand.

Far more than President Kennedy, accordingly, President Johnson can afford to rely on the regular lines of departmental authority. As recounted in Charles Robert's new book "L.B.J.'s Inner Circle," the President once said: "I expect each Cabinet officer to be the outstanding expert in his field, and I expect them to give

me the best advice on matters in their field."

THE BUNDY staff system, in these conditions, becomes not so much a necessity as a convenience. President Johnson can choose to continue it as before, or to modify it extensively. And it is only after that choice has been made that personalities enter the picture at all.

If the choice is to modify the staff role, then it makes sense to let Mr. Bundy go, and to replace him with a junior member from the staff or from one of the other departments. National security business would then flow more directly between the President and the departments. And an indent would be made for further changes, if the President wanted them, in the top command of the national security system.

If the choice is to keep the system as is, however, the President can either make an all-out effort to hold Mr. Bundy or seek a replacement of similar caliber. In that case, the name that comes to mind is the name of the President's press secretary, Bill D. Moyers, or Mr. Moyers, and he alone, commands the respect of the President and the department heads in sufficient measure to keep business flowing as it did before.

Naturally, given the gossip nature of the subject, an argument has already been advanced against Mr. Moyers. It is that a Texan closely connected with the President's personal entourage ought not to become a dominant figure in national security matters. In fact, the contrary is the case. One good reason for putting Mr. Moyers in the job is that it would be a visible breaking of the iron grip held over the national security field for the last 25 years by the Eastern establishment.

© 1965, Publishers Newspaper Syndicate